R E P O R T  R E S U M E S

ED 011 487 RE 000 102

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, 1920-1960.

BY- HOMZE, ALMA

PUB DATE JAN 66

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.09 HC-$0.24 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *CHILDRENS BOOKS, *BOOKLISTS, *REACTIVE BEHAVIOR, *LITERARY DISCRIMINATION, *BEHAVIOR PATTERNS, CRITICAL READING, PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT, PEER GROUPS, DISCRIMINATORY ATTITUDES (SOCIAL), PARENT CHILD RELATIONSHIP,

THE BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS, BACKGROUNDS, AND THEMES OF CHILDREN'S REALISTIC TRADE BOOKS WERE IDENTIFIED. NINE CATEGORIES OF INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR WERE DEVELOPED AND DEFINED IN THIS INVESTIGATION OF CHANGES IN CONTENT OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS PUBLISHED WITHIN A PERIOD OF 40 YEARS, FROM 1920-60. FROM 780 SAMPLES REVIEWED BY THE EXAMINER, THREE JUDGES SELECTED 78 BOOKS PORTRAYING CHARACTERS EXHIBITING BELIEVABLE BEHAVIOR. THE BOOK ANALYSIS WAS BASED UPON SAMPLES OF THE VERBAL REACTION BETWEEN TWO OR MORE CHARACTERS WITHIN EACH OF 10 SECTIONS FOR EACH BOOK. TOTALS FOR EACH ITEM WERE COMPUTED FOR EACH YEAR AND THE AVERAGE PERCENTAGES FOR THE 1920-40 AND 1945-60 PERIODS WERE CALCULATED. THE RELIABILITY OF THE SYSTEM OF ANALYSIS WAS EXAMINED BY TWO JUDGES. CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE CHILD-ADULT, THE CHILD-CHILD BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS, URBAN-RURAL BACKGROUND, AND IN THE RELATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE FAMILY, THE PEER GROUP, AND TO SOCIETY WERE NOTED IN THE RESEARCH. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "ELEMENTARY ENGLISH," VOLUME 43, NUMBER 52, JANUARY 1966. (MC)

Elementary English, 43(Jan. 1966), 26-28, 52.

ED011487

Alma Homze

# Interpersonal Relations in Children's Literature 1920–1960

Investigations of children's reading materials have been primarily concerned with vocabulary or sentence structure and length. However, of particular value are the few content analyses of books which describe characters as real people in real situations. Those books provide backgrounds and behaviors with which a child identifies and from which he learns new ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. Understanding the contents of children's books is, then, a prerequisite to understanding children's behavior.

*The Problem*

To answer the question, "What is in a child's book?" the writer examined 780 samples of children's realistic trade books published from 1920 to 1960. The specific objectives of the investigation were to identify behaviors, backgrounds, and themes of the books and discern changes in those contents from the 1920-1940 period to the 1945-1960 period.

The nine categories of interpersonal behavior developed and defined were: Gives Direction, Accepts Direction, Rejects Direction, Joint Action, Supporting Action, Nonsupporting Action, Friendly Action, and Competitive Action. Those behaviors were analyzed in terms of who instigated the behavior and who received it, or the adult-child, child-adult, and child-child relationships. Background items investigated were the geographical area, rural-urban setting, and specific place of interaction, and the number, age, sex, familial relationship, occupation, socio-economic level, and ethnic group of the characters. General themes of the books were categorized under three headings: stories of families, stories of groups of children, and stories of individual children.

*Procedures*

A list of realistic children's books was compliled from issues of *The Book Review Digest* published at five-year intervals. The list was submitted to three judges who selected the books which best portrayed characters performing believable behaviors. Seventy-eight books received 100 percent agreement to be included in the study.

The book analysis was based on samples found by dividing each book into ten equal sections, locating the first complete verbal interaction between two or more characters within each section, and analyzing each sample for the presence of the behavior and background items. Totals for each item present were computed for each year, and average percentages for the 1920-1940 and 1945-1960 period were calculated. Tables were developed which presented the results in

Dr. Homze is a member of the Department of Elementary Education, Teachers College, University of Nebraska. The paper is based on her doctoral dissertation, written in 1963, at the Pennsylvania State University.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Richard Ohmann TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

RE 000 102

five-year intervals, averages for the two periods, *t* scores, and levels of statistical significance.

Reliability of the system of analyses was examined by two independent judges who duplicated the process with ten books randomly selected from those in the study. There was a mean agreement between the investigator and the two judges of 93.60 percent for the behavior items, 95.73 percent for the background items, and 91.03 percent for the themes.

*The Findings*

The research revealed that adult characters give a decreasing number of friendly expressions and critical overtures, accept and reject fewer directions, and engage in fewer joint activities with child characters. Such changes in behavior implies that the influence of adults is being removed from the life of children. Children's books leave the impression that behaviors of adults and children do not overlap and that adults are not concerned about the growing independence of child characters. Parents, librarians, authors, publishers, and guidance workers must balance the growing gap in the relationship among book adults and children by writing and selecting books which present adult characters who do express love but also criticism, who enjoy working with children, and who exhibit mature judgment in balancing a child's independence with a social consciousness.

As the adult characters retreat from the child's world in books, the children become more openly critical, more candid in complying with or refusing directions, and less affectionate in their relationships with adult characters. Such behavior reinforces the independence of the child characters and their increasing disdain for and rejection of adult authority. To help child readers develop good relationships with adults, writers need to present child characters who have a respect for the wisdom, mature opinion, and experience of adults, At the same time, adults should be portrayed with exemplary characters and personalities that encourage imitation.

The decreasingly effective adult characters in these books gives readers the impression that this is a "child's world" without adult supervision or guidance. This "child's world" is further emphasized by the behaviors of the child characters. These fictitious models for real children are paragons of self-sufficiency. They direct activities, express little verbal support, openly criticize, and engage in more joint and more competitive interactions with each other. This behavior, increasingly independent of adult guidance, presents to readers tenuous relationships among child characters and questionable models for behavior. In selecting books for children's reading, parents and librarians need to include stories of child characters who can work cooperatively while they are affectionate and kind to each other.

The geographical locations described in children's books are more urbanized and extend throughout the United States. With the diversity of backgrounds, readers are better able to understand how lives of book characters are affected by their environment. However, a decreasing number of interactions in homes and recreation areas and an increasing number of interactions in streets may indicate to readers that one should meet friends in unsupervised areas. In writing books for children, authors may wish to describe homes as pleasant and desirable settings which offer privacy to children as well as to adults.

Even though locations described in books are more heterogeneous, the ages of the characters are more homogeneous. The numbers of interactions with adult relatives, friends, and teachers diminish while the numbers of situations with child rela-

tives, friends, and other children increase. Again, the predominantly child-oriented world in these books provides many models of the reader's age but few mature, appealing adults through which a child reader could learn of adult behaviors. To complement the child characters, writers and publishers should include in children's books adult characters, especially parents, from whom readers can select desirable adult values.

Although the number of managers, clerks, and service workers is increasing, there is a variety of middle class occupations with meager or no representation in children's books. Since child readers meet few welders, carpenters, electricians, or plumbers in books, they can glean few conceptions of the influence of certain occupations on the lives of people and can develop little understanding of the values of being a waitress, hairdresser, gardener, or garbage man. Greater varieties of occupations in children's books would aid children in understanding and selecting their own occupations. It is suggested that writers be encouraged to extend the occupational groups described in children's literature and to emphasize the importance of all occupations to society.

That child characters are predominantly American middle class Caucasians serves to reinforce the image that children's books present not only a child's world, but a *particular* child's world. Although descriptions of various ethnic groups and upper and lower socioeconomic levels are increasing, the child characters have remarkably similar backgrounds. They are from white-collar families who have a vacation at grandma's farm every summer. If children's books are to extend the reader's insight, writers and publishers must portray a variety of characters which include various racial, national, religious, and vocational backgrounds.

*Conclusions*

As specific behaviors and backgrounds in the books examined have changed from the 1920-1940 to the 1945-1960 period, so the general themes of the books have also changed. There is an increasing emphasis on themes of problems and adjustments of individual child characters. Such books provide readers with a great variety of solutions to their own problems. However, the decreasing number of stories of family life and of groups of children emphasizes the alienation of the child from his family and the independence of the children.

Writers could serve the organization of the family, the growth of democratic groups, and the development of mature solutions to behavioral problems by depicting wiser adults who actively participate in their children's lives, groups of children engaged in cooperative activities, and child characters who consider alternatives and future consequences of behavior as well as immediate independent goals.

While there is an increasing emphasis in children's books on the activities of child characters, there is a corresponding de-emphasis on the sensitivities of childhood. As the children in books direct their lives and amuse themselves with more and more material possessions, they seldom are described as discovering the pleasures of wild life, art and music, or even reading. Authors need to present characters who respond to beauty as well as to activity.

*Summary*

"What is in a child's book?" This investigation revealed that realistic children's books depict a "child's world" in which adult characters are given decreasing importance. The child's world described in these books is a homogeneous one; it is a world of middle-class American children

*(Continued on page 52)*

*Meet the Real "Mary Poppins"*

What then can one do when faced with the Disney syndrome and yet is responsible for the education and cultural heritage of children through literature?

Certainly it would be naive to ignore the impact of the Disney corporation upon the realm of children's literature. The Disney materials exist in too wise a scope for us to hide our heads in the sand and hope they will go away, or at least dissipate. They will not.

Perhaps one way would be to openly invite comparison between the Disney version and the original. Teachers and librarians can feature a children's story that has been put under the Disney paint brush, and let children examine them both.

Classrooms in the elementary school may serve as an excellent place to invite comparison. The oral reading of *Mary Poppins*, by the teacher, a chapter per day, can give children unable to overcome the print barrier of the original, an opportunity to experience the magical Miss Poppins as she was created. Certainly a discussion of the two versions is a natural follow-up to an activity of this kind.

*Peter Pan, Bambi,* and the others, in the original form, can be presented in the same way. Oral reading to children is valuable in its own right, but coupled with an opportunity to compare real literature with its pseudo counterpart, can indeed be a valuable learning experience.

Librarians can also point up the differences between the original and the movie versions. Often displays in the children's room of a library, or in a school library can introduce children to the original. The writer is reminded of a bulletin board display placed in front of a children's room in a northern California public library. It was colorful and most appealing to the eye. The message the bulletin board carried gave a chuckle to the many adult users of the library. It stated very simply: *"Come in and meet the real Mary Poppins."* One would hope that message would be repeated in children's libraries all across the nation.

Children are being cheated of one of basic rights of childhood when they are denied the experience of great children's literature. Certainly they are being fooled when imitations masquerade under the cloak of an original. The responsibility of allowing great children's books to reach their audience in the correct form is a joint effort between the school, the library and the home. It is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly. As librarians and teachers we should, perhaps, take the lead.

---

**INTERPERSONAL—** *Continued from page 28*

who direct their own lives without parents and solve their own problems without counselors. In writing books for readers, selecting books for publication, purchasing books for distribution, or enjoying books with children, authors, publishers, teachers, and parents can enrich children's reading by creating admirable adult characters, describing many types of characters with a variety of backgrounds, and stressing the relationship of the individual to his family, his peer group, and, ultimately, his society.